

THE FIRST HOSPITAL IN THE NEW WORLD

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DEBATE about priorities continues and many hospitals vie for seniority. Even in uncloistered Britain, St. Bartholomew's and St. Thomas' hospitals attempt to trace their ancient lineage to monastic foundations. In the new world, however, pride of place belongs to the colonizing emissaries of their most Catholic majesties, Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain.

Occupation of the overseas territories discovered after 1492 required that the Spanish crown develop a system of health care as an indispensable part of governmental services for safe colonization of newly acquired territories. One of the earliest measures was building hospitals. Bartolome Las Casas, referring to the foundation in Hispaniola of the village of La Isabella, the first documented European settlement in the New World, recounts that in January 1494 "Columbus made haste in constructing a house to keep supplies and the ammunition for the soldiers, a church, and a hospital."¹

No further information survives as to whether this hospital was ever built, but for most historians the Hospital of St. Nicholas of Bari was the first built in the new world. It was unquestionably the first permanent hospital in the new world, but the first—if temporary—hospital of which there is a record must be the house where 40 injured Spaniards were placed and treated following the Indian uprising of 1494, when chiefs Guatiguana, Caonabo, Guarionex, and Mayobanex attacked Fort Magdalena. The hospital-house near the fort was burned by Guatiguana.² The fate of the wounded patients is not recorded.

The origin of the Hospital of St. Nicholas, according to Archbishop Carvajal y Rivera in a letter to Charles II of Spain dated December 2, 1695, was as follows:

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Remains of St. Nicholas Hospital at Santo Domingo showing an archway with supporting columns, part of the remaining walls, and a recent supporting wall with its own bricked-in archway.

In the beginning, this hospital was a hut situated in the same place where the Chapel of Our Lady of the High Grace is now located. It belonged to a pious negro woman who gathered all the poor people she could and treated according to her skill.

The founder of St. Nicholas Hospital proper was Governor Nicholas de Ovando. In the words of Oviedo:³

Ovando founded the St. Nicholas Hospital of this city and provided it with the good source of income it now enjoys. The source of this income was the best rented houses in this city.

In building this hospital, Ovando followed instructions received from King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella in a letter dated March 20, 1503 requesting that:⁴

Our said Governor should build in those towns where he saw the greater need, houses for hospitals in which to receive and care for the Christian poor and the Indians.

The exact date of construction of the hospital whose ruins stand in Santo Domingo cannot be established with accuracy (see accompanying figure). Most of the documents relating to this hospital were destroyed during the pillage of the city by Sir Francis Drake in 1586, but a document dis-

covered in the Archives of Seville, dated 1586, refers to the St. Nicholas Hospital.⁵

...they do know and have information obtained from reports, auditing tax collection; or by other means, or because they heard it from their ancestors, that Frey Nicholas de Ovando—built and founded said Hospital in the year of One thousand five hundred and three on the 29th of November.

...they do know that the record of the foundation of said Hospital with all its Chapters, Conditions and Ordinances, were written in a large book, bound in parchment, that was always kept in the archive of said Hospital, until the Lutheran Englishman that came with Francis Drake as their Captain, around January of the present year of eight six, entered and robbed the city, and sacked and burned most of it, and particularly robbed said Hospital, and since that time the said Book has been missing with many other papers, Bulls and Briefs from said Hospital...

The collection of unpublished documents printed by the Spanish Royal Academy of History contains the following statement:⁶

In 1508 all the churches in (Hispaniola) were made of straw and have collapsed many times, and rebuilt just as many times.

It would seem from this information that the building may not have been completed by 1508. Perhaps the answer to when the final building was erected was given during an interrogatory conducted in June 5, 1577 to collect information for the St. Nicholas Hospital Board:⁷

And know that said brothers and officials of the Brotherhood of the Conception laid the first stone of said Hospital, now known as the old hospital; from alms collected to treat the poor. This was in the year of one thousand five hundred and nineteen.... At the beginning it was impossible to care in said hospital for more than six patients; and thus by order of the Brotherhood no more than six patients should be admitted.

In the same interrogatory:

...they do know, that since said year of nineteen (1519) until today there have been so many contributions given by the neighbors, members of the Brotherhood and by other permanently settled private citizens, that a very important large house has been constructed at such cost that if one were to build it today it would cost more than two hundred thousand pesos in actual currency.

...they do know that in said Hospital in the *new* building rooms were made in the second floor where the indigent patients were taken up and placed in their couches and beds. The patients that were transferred from the *old* building and taken up (2nd floor) were those with fever; this was in the year of fifty-two (1552). In the old building remained in separate rooms an infirmary for wounds; a separated infirmary for bubas and another separate room for the treatment of women.

It can be seen from the above that the original hospital founded by Ovando could accommodate only six patients. In 1519 new construction was started, which in turn became the old hospital, which was replaced by a new and final building completed about 1552. Indirect corroborative evidence for the approximate date of completion of the final building is provided by a letter from a lawyer of the Royal Tribunal dated 1550,

which contains an account of a criminal case linked to the construction of the St. Nicholas Hospital. A certain Lorenzo Suarez married the daughter of Francisco Diaz de Pravia against her father's will. The animosity that arose between father and son-in-law by this marriage culminated in a fist fight. During the fight Suarez fatally injured his father-in-law and escaped. Being pursued:

He entered the Hospital of St. Nicholas in this city and climbed to the top of the building through a small opening on which there was a lift-ladder. From there he defended himself against myself and against the lawyers Sorita and Hurtado who were also present. He threw many bricks and boards from the hospital building materials, as well as all manner of things scattered around him, until one of those that came in support of the Royal Justice shot an arrow from afar and hit Suarez who because of loss of blood lost consciousness.

One can see from this letter that in 1550 the second floor of the Hospital was still under construction. This information supports the interrogatory's assertion that the hospital was finally completed in 1552. Little information about the hospital is available after the city was sacked by Drake. It is known that the building was repaired in 1756 and again in 1772. From 1739 to 1762 a large number of soldiers were admitted to St. Nicholas Hospital and in September 3, 1777 the hospital became a military hospital: "To take care of soldiers and convicts but without detriment to the general public and the poor." A report dated November 20, 1783 quoted by Carlos Nouel⁸ refers to the St. Nicholas Hospital and lists the personnel assigned to the care of patients.

For the care of soldiers in the Military Hospital:

one ward corporal, wife and daughter

one cook

four servants

three slaves—washer-women

Fee: 150 pesos a year

It was estimated that 80 soldiers died each quinquennium.

In the Hospital for the Poor:

one chief, male nurse with 4 children

one female helper

seven slaves

In the quinquennium 126 indigent poor have died.

In 1883 the hospital was bought by Dr. Guillermo de la Fuente who entertained the idea of establishing a hospital-based private system of health care, but the building was beyond repair and soon became the prey of vandals. In the words of Dr. J. Balaguer:⁹

Fate did not grant St. Nicholas the glory of being defeated by the monstrous forces of nature, of being dragged into an abyss in the arms of an Olympian Cyclop like the one in Goethe's fable who trembled with irascible pride when swept away by hordes of Titans. Time inflicted mortal wounds to the secular body of this building, but spared its lofty

richness and immortal treasures. Men moved by greed touched with cruelty undertook the destruction of these ancient stones by pounding on them a thousand times with their picks of destruction. These men that destroyed St. Nicholas for the spoils of its precious woods justified their incredible deed on the basis of public safety by indicating that the open crevices in some parts of the building could cause the collapse of its dome.

The hospital temporarily became a carpentry shop until its final demolition in 1911.

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